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2021-06-04

Book Review by Jonathan D. Pryor of Will China Dominate the 21st Century? by Jonathan Fenby

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Pryor, Jonathan D. "Will China Dominate the 21st Century?" SSQ Strategic Studies Quarterly (Air University). June 4, 2021.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/67885>

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Volume 15 Issue 3 - Fall 2021

BOOK REVIEWS

Will China Dominate the 21st Century?

Published June 04, 2021

Will China Dominate the 21st Century?, 2d ed., by Jonathan Fenby. Polity Press, 2017, 141 pp.

In an era of increasing rivalry between the United States and China, the pursuit of influence propels competition, and the fear of defeat inspires action. Jonathan Fenby's *Will China Dominate the 21st Century?* investigates China's trend of aggressive economic growth to threaten a Western-established global order. Fenby declares that China will not succeed and that a range of domestic factors will constrain China's influence and limit its future development.

An experienced political analyst and journalist, author Jonathan Fenby has spent more than 20 years reporting on China, including as editor of the *South China Morning Post*. In *Will China Dominate?*, Fenby noticeably demonstrates a preference to explore domestic politics and economic policies. His analysis of other important factors that contribute to the core problem statement is limited, namely those related to the military and information domains. Instead, his succinct, to-the-point writing focuses on key aspects of a Chinese political structure that he claims contains important shortcomings that will limit economic growth. Expanding on his account of China's domestic limitations, Fenby enters an ongoing policy debate in the literature concerning China's future and takes a skeptical view of its increasing strength.

In particular, Fenby submits that despite its substantial economic growth, China's one-party system and its regime's unrelenting desire for self-preservation are doomed to stall economic progress. His book recounts significant political events of the post-Chinese civil war era and largely focuses on events leading up to Xi Jinping's ascension and his actions to strengthen his authority over China. While acknowledging China's growth over the past four decades, Fenby dissects critical shortcomings of the Communist Party and China's economic system that support his narrative of a predestined plateau. He proposes China's current system is filled with deep-seated uncertainties and challenges, such as a political structure that mismanages growth, bureaucratic corruption in local governments, and the Communist Party's resistance to adopt new policies. The strength of Fenby's premise lies in coupling China's government policies to his claims of an "unsustainable, uncoordinated, unbalanced, and unstable" Chinese economy. Using examples from a broad range

of sectors, he describes how various Chinese policies restrain its economy. Moreover, Fenby asserts that until China's uncompromising political structure evolves, its potential growth and global influence are limited.

His argument is plausible, and the challenges China faces are substantial. However, the book neglects to address an important question: What constitutes domination in the twenty-first century? Fenby posits that China's faults will "limit its [own] progress" and prevent the nation from attaining its "full potential." But he does not explain the consequences of failing to attain such an abstract standard as "full potential," which realistically no country can achieve. Fenby's furthering of this narrative by describing China's future performance as "muddling through" leaves the reader seeking a deeper analysis of China's prospects and wondering what threshold it would need to achieve to dominate the century.

Lurking behind Fenby's analysis is the complexity of great power competition. *Will China Dominate?* reveals that "China has shown that it can shake the established world order" without necessarily dominating it. China's existence and growth as a world power influences global opinion even if the country does not achieve its "full potential." However, Fenby seems to minimize this notion and reduce China to something less powerful while China remains committed to its traditional policies. Instead of comparing China's growth to an ideal goal, a better measure of success may have been an in-depth comparison relative to its competitors. China may not need to achieve its "full potential" to outmaneuver and overpower its rivals.

Will China Dominate the 21st Century? is an informative read that illustrates the important aspects of a politically restrained system while providing a fresh take on China's position on the global stage. Although Fenby did not scrutinize all aspects of competition, the final section of his book contains a compilation of relevant literature for further reading. Those expecting an analysis of how China's use of coercive foreign policy will affect its ability to dominate the world stage may be disappointed. Nevertheless, readers seeking a synopsis of China's political and social challenges that threaten its continued economic growth will find this book worth their study.

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